

P-102 commentary in discussions

Wolstenholme, Gordon (ed). Man and his Future. A Ciba Foundation Volume. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1963.

Eugenics and Genetics

"Discussion" for Lederberg Commentary

pp. 288-289 ; p. 297

Lederberg: In answer to Dr. Bronowski's question about our motivation, I think that most of us here believe that the present population of the world is not intelligent enough to keep itself from being blown up, and we would like to make some provision for the future so that it will have a slightly better chance of avoiding this particular contingency. I am not saying that our measures will be effective, but I think this is our motivation; it is not the negative but the positive aspects of genetic control that we are dealing with here.

On the other hand I have serious doubts about the proposals for controlling reproduction that have been presented to us. The aspects of social control that seem to be necessary to make these proposals technically effective are I think extremely offensive and extremely dangerous, certainly in our present social context. But leaving the matter to individual choice, which from a social standpoint is the most ideal, is certainly not going to be technically effective. And if people are allowed to choose the fathers of their children, will they not choose just the more notorious projections of their own images, exaggerated by the publicity given to advertised donors?

Comfort: Dr. Lederberg, what makes you think that we could make ourselves less likely to blow ourselves up by a genetic increase in intelligence?

Lederberg: I didn't say I thought we would succeed; I said I think this is our underlying motivation for attempting genetic control.

Comfort: I should think that it is not so much low I.Q.'s, but personality problems and emotional disturbances which were the cause of our liability to blow ourselves up.

Lederberg: These are just as likely to be under genetic control.

Comfort: They may be, but in man there is a large latitude for training. Dr. Trowell spoke about breeding a generation that displayed cruelty and efficiency. I think one could do this -- or for that matter do the opposite -- much more simply by upbringing than one can by trying to alter genetic constitution.

Bronowski: I would still like an answer to my question. What is the evidence that genetically the human population is deteriorating?

Huxley: The evidence is mainly deductive, based on the fact that we are preserving many more genetically defective people than before, and are getting a lot of radioactive fallout.

Meanwhile, the study of intelligence in Scottish children which you cited is not valid evidence. During the period between the first and the second tests, children generally were becoming larger, were developing more rapidly, and therefore were becoming more intelligent for their chronological age.

The important point, however, as Lederberg said, is not the negative one of deterioration (although it might become so if there were greatly increased fallout); the main thing is to aim at positive improvement. Much is possible and there are methods to do it. You need not start with drastic methods; nobody is going to solve the population problem by saying that a certain number of people are not going to be allowed to have any children. But you can make a start. At the moment many governments are encouraging people to have more children than they otherwise would by means of high family allowances. Why shouldn't you start by regulating family allowances, so that parents get a lot of money on the first two children, say, then less for the third, and then tailing off rapidly to a negative payment, a deduction, for children above a certain large number?

p. 297 Lederberg: The converse of Huxley's calculation is that in order to shift the mean I.Q. by 1.5/00 you must increase the production of geniuses by 50 percent. It is perhaps better to aim at just increasing the variance. The question is not whether we should think about doing eugenics; we certainly should, and should collect just as much information as possible. The point is whether we should embark on a concrete programme that is very costly in social and political stresses for an aim which isn't very well crystallized yet.

Huxley: I think most people would agree that even if we cannot yet carry out a eugenic programme, we can begin doing something about controlling the quantity of population. The experience we gain in this field will help us to deal with eugenic problems later.